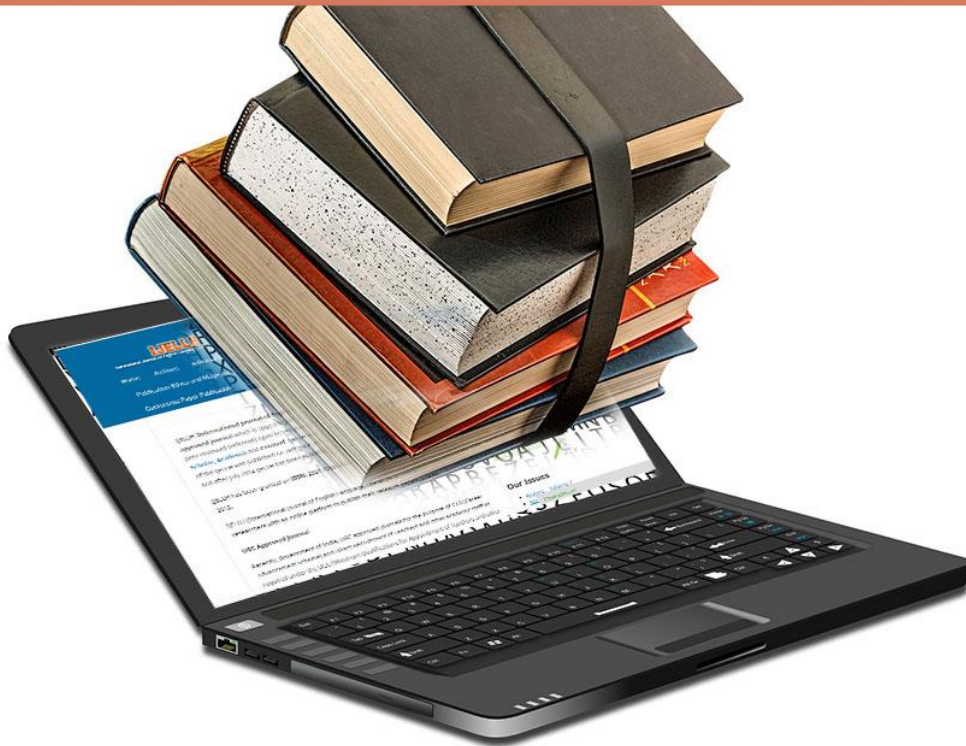


ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 3, March 2019

www.ijellh.com

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Racial Atrocities in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Abstract

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the first novel in the series of seven autobiographies. This debut novel describes the life of the protagonist, Marguerite (Maya Angelou) from the age of three to seventeen. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is Angelou's most highly praised work and a bestselling novel at the time of publication. It was nominated for a National Book Award in 1970. It is included in many educational syllabuses to prove the practice of racism and has also been criticized as a revolutionary autobiography. Even in her genre of autobiography Angelou used many literary techniques, style, themes, characterization and dialogues, to mould it like a fiction. This volume is the portrayal of the author's childhood experience with her grandmother in the Southern part of America, the dominance of the white folks and her trauma as a rape victim when she was abused by her mother's lover. She is the representation of many African American girls who are suppressed physically and racially.

Keywords: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Racism, Discrimination, Violence, Maya Angelou

Racial Atrocities in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Through her story, the author had depicted the problems and sufferings faced by many coloured people in America. She mostly concentrated about her community and discovery of self. She defined a unique vision of the work and illustrated the reality to her readers through her writings. The world seems to be disillusion and despair, aloneness and self doubts. In “Racial Protest, Identity, Words and Form in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*” Pierre Walker a well known critic gives his opinion that “racism is the most important theme of the first part of Angelou's autobiography” (96).

This volume *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings* begins with the narration of Marguerite Johnson, the protagonist of the novel. Marguerite Johnson is the real birth name of Maya Angelou. The book begins on an early morning of Easter Sunday when Maya was a young child who longs to look beautiful like other white girls in lavender taffeta. In the opening pages of the book, Maya suffered from racial self-hatred, imagining that she was “really white” with “light-blue eyes” and “long and blond hair”. Marguerite has no self-confidence, as a young child. She believed that she is ugly, so she almost convinced herself that she is actually white instead of Black “I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world” (CB 4). In Maya's version of the truth, she is a blue-eyed blond little girl, a cruel fairy stepmother out of jealousy trapped in the body of a “too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet, and a space between her teeth” (CB 5).

Internalized racism is commonly viewed upon as a problem that oppresses people. It is a product of racism, which emerges because of the duality in which a person is looked at and who is looking at the person. As Dubois stated in *The Souls of Black Folk* that “One ever feel his two-ness,- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from

being torn asunder” (38). According to Regina Blackburn, Maya’s “severe self-hatred derived from her appearance. Beaten down by massive self-loathing and self-blame, Maya believed her appearance was too offensive to merit any kind of true affection from others” (144). The reality and impossibility rubbed away her white fantasy, so she flees from the church crying.

She thought that the white kids are always beautiful and not ugly like the coloured children. As a coloured American woman Momma did not want to change and give up their style and identity, so she did not allow Marguerite to straighten the hair. “Wouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten?”(CB 4). Rachel Thomas in “Exuberance as Beauty: The Prose and Poetry of Maya Angelou” stated that:

This intense opposition to her black identity stems in part from Angelou’s sense of abandonment by her parents. With the arrival of a beautiful blonde, blue-eyed doll from her mother, Maya understands her skin color as wrong; she feels diminished as an African American because, the first contact with her mother, she receives assurance of her previous conjecture that little white girls ‘were everybody’s dream of what was right in the world.’ (52)

She entirely separates herself from her own coloured race. Since she refuses to accept being who she is and longs for a foreign identity is said to be identity crises.

Angelou felt that living in a racist society is an unexplainable pain for the coloured victims. “If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat” (6). Maya Angelou also proved that growing up and surviving as a young girl in the South of the 1930s and 1940s is painful

experience. The *Caged Bird* deals with the coloured Americans who struggled to cope up with the inequalities of American racism.

At the age of three Marguerite, along with her brother Bailey who is four year old, reached Stamps, Arkansas from Long Beach, California. Since their father broke up with their mother from the shattering marriage, he ‘shipped’ them to his mother’s house in Stamps, Arkansas. Instead of using the word ‘sent’ Angelou picked the word ‘shipped’ which helps the readers to easily understand the worse situation of the writer herself. He even hired a porter to take care of the children during the journey but the porter pinned the tickets to Bailey’s inside coat pocket and got down from the train next day in Arizona. Like a lifeless luggage, they were tagged with their name and nativity and travelled all alone. During their journey they met many coloured passengers. They felt pity for this poor children and afford them some food. “United States had been crossed thousands of times by frightened Black Children travelling alone to their newly affluent parents in Northern cities, or back to grandmothers in southern towns” (CB 7-8). Here the writer and her brother stand as a synecdoche for the whole coloured community in the United States of America.

In Arkansas, the children lived with their grandmother Momma and Uncle Willie in the rear of their Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store which was owned by their Momma for twenty five years. Her shop is a gathering place for members of her community. The Store speaks about the black rural town life during the 1930s. At the end of the Civil War they had been promised for land and animals. The Southern blacks entered into a period of American history of discrimination and violence after the period of slavery. The Jim Crow era, witnessed the exploitation of the black farmer in the South at the hands of racist whites who sought to suppress the black’s right to property, animals and financial support. This era also brought the segregation laws that affected the coloured people life and sparked the development of racist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan gang, which threatened the

black communities. Maya vividly describes the cotton pickers' bodies, their torn clothes, and their exhausted faces when they return from the fields.

Angelou's grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson, with whom she and her brother, Bailey, lived in Stamps, is a strong symbol of the Black society. She was respected in the Christian community which was formed by Blacks society. Uncle Willie is a physically disabled man. He was crippled from his childhood. Since Momma is a loyal lady, the Sheriff himself pulled over by the store and informed her about the Klan's men. He warned her to hide Willie from those men's sight tonight. "“Annie, tell Willie he better lay low tonight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady tonight. Some of the boys'll be coming over here later”" (CB 19-20). White dominance often opens the eyes of Angelou that she belonged to an oppressed class. She saw Uncle Willie is forced to hide inside the potato bin when sheriff casually warned about the Ku Klux Klan men comes in search of a coloured man. Even though Willie could not commit any crime because of his disability, he is found to be guilty being a coloured man. He was suspected just because of his coloured race in the State of America.

The cruel racist behaviour is not only presented in adults but also inculcated in innocent white children too. Angelou recalled her sorrowful experience which was taught by Momma, how to survive and succeed in that circumstance. Like a mirror they reflect their racist ancestors. When she was ten years old, this incident attacked her heart very much. The white kids were the troublemakers who caused more trouble to Momma and did not allow her to work peacefully in her store. They are denoted as powhitetrash. The white kids were not ready to respect Momma even for her older age too. They imitated her actions and disturbed her. Momma stood solidly on her deck, smiling and humming a hymn. When the girls found that she does not care about any mockeries and faces, one made a handstand.

At first they pretended seriousness. Then one of them wrapped her right arm in the crook of her left, pushed out her mouth and started to hum. Another said, 'Naw, Helen, you ain't standing like her. This here's it.' Then she lifted her chest, folded her arms and mocked that strange carriage that was Annie Henderson. Another laughed, 'Naw, you can't do it. Your mouth ain't pooched out enough. It's like this.' (CB 32-33)

Maya observed all these irritating scenes from inside store, suffered and felt humiliation. She wanted to confront the white girls, but she realized that she is taught to remain silent and not mess up with the whites. The white kids attempts to use their race as an instrument of power. On the other hand, the coloured women attempt to practice the course of silence. The reason for this type of attitude among children is brought by the society which always taught them that the coloured are always inferior to the whites in all aspects.

The "powhitetrash" girls found no use of irritating Momma, so they waved good-bye and left. Marguerite was in full fury when Momma replied good-bye to them with proper salutation:

"Bye, Miz Helen, 'bye, Miz Ruth, 'bye, Miz Eloise." I burst. A firecracker July-the-Fourth burst. How could Momma call them Miz? The mean nasty things. Why couldn't she have come inside the sweet, cool store when we saw them breasting the hill? What did she prove? And then if they were dirty, mean and impudent, why did Momma have to call them Miz? (CB 35)

Marguerite found Momma has achieved something. When there is no effective reaction for segregation and racism, then definitely the practice of racial discrimination would be stopped. Maya understood that this is a great way to escape from the racial troubles. The power of passive resistance can able to splash out the racism.

Few years before the arrival of Marguerite and Bailey, a man was hunted down for assaulting a white woman. In order to escape he ran into Momma's store and took shelter under the care of Momma and Uncle Willie. They safely bid him farewell on his way. Unfortunately, the police caught him and apprehended him in court. During the enquiry session he revealed the truth that, he took refuge in Mrs. Henderson's store, after the crime. When Momma subpoenaed in front of the court and acclaimed herself as Mrs. Henderson "the judge, the bailiff and other whites in the audience laughed. The judge had really made a gaffe calling a Negro woman Mrs.," (CB 52). It proves that the white people were not ready to indicate a Negro woman with formal salutations also. The judge could not accept the fact that a woman who owned a store in Arkansas would turn out to be a coloured. "The whites tickled their funny bones with the incident for a long time and the Negroes thought it proved the worth" (CB 52). This incident also points out the double oppression imposed by the white judge who saw Momma as Negro first and then as a woman.

Again the children were moved in to their mother Vivian Baxter's house at St. Louis. There these kids lived along with their mother's boyfriend Mr. Freeman. As an eight year old child Marguerite could not recognize Freeman's intention on her. When he tried to harass her by holding her tight in his arms, she saw him as a fatherly figure. She felt at home in his arms. She thought that he would not let anything bad will ever happen to her. She was happy that, at last she got a lovable father. Marguerite was brutally raped by Mr. Freeman. His savage self came to light when he threatened her during the molestation "If you scream, I'm gonna kill you. And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey." (CB 84). Her senses are torn apart during the act of rape. The eight year old body could not bear the pain and resist the civilized ape's violence on her.

She has fallen sick because of her unspeakable fear. In hospital they discovered that she was raped by someone. When Bailey enquired Marguerite about the man who disgraced

her, she tore out the mask of Mr. Freeman. By hearing this, the family wanted to punish that rapist legally. In the court, Marguerite was in a situation to answer all the questions raised by Mr. Freeman's lawyer, to prove herself as an innocent victim and him as an accused. Justice won when the criminal was identified and given punishment. Even though, he was sealed as an accused and sentenced imprisonment, he got released by his lawyer with the loops existed in law. He tried to cheat the law and justice, but destiny gave him final judgment called murder. Suddenly, Mr. Freeman was found murdered, most of them suspected Marguerite's family. After his death, Marguerite was haunted with guilt and stopped talking with everyone except Bailey. Everyone thought her behaviour is changed because of her post-rape trauma. So she was sent to Stamps from St. Louis with Bailey.

Angelou chronicled how she climbed high from innocent childhood to adolescent awareness and social barriers which she confronted and overcame to maintain her dignity. Her first confrontation with a white lady made her to understand the social reality. In the past, the whites denoted the coloured people as "niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows and spooks." Later the whites started to change the name of the servants as per their convenience.

At the age of eleven Marguerite worked in Mrs. Viola Cullinam's house for few days. Mrs. Viola Cullinam is a wealthy Southern white lady whom neither custom nor tradition taught to be kind with a Black American. As per American racism, they always try to set limitations and suppress a Black person's identity. Mrs. Cullinam attempted it, by addressing Marguerite in the name of her convenience and refuses to call her proper name. Mrs. Cullinam's friends advised her "the name's too long. I'd never bother myself. I'd call her Mary if I was you" (CB 117) because the name Mary seems to be shorter than Marguerite.

The very next day, she called me by the wrong name. Miss Glory and I were washing up the lunch dishes when Mrs. Cullinan came to the doorway.

"Mary?" Miss Glory asked, "Who?" Mrs. Cullinan, sagging a little, knew and

I knew. "I want Mary to go down to Mrs. Randall's and take her some soup. She's not been feeling well for a few days." Miss Glory's face was a wonder to see. "You mean Margaret, ma'am. Her name's Margaret." "That's too long. She's Mary from now on. (CB 117-118)

When Marguerite could not resist the name change, Miss Glory confessed that "My name used to be Hallelujah. That's what Ma named me, but my mistress give me 'Glory', and it stuck" (CB 118). Glory's acceptance of Mrs. Cullinan's racist attitude contrasted with Maya's resistance. Glory enjoys the new name since it is short. Even though the Black girl is victimized of the attack, she does not realize it, as an insult. Glory seems to accept the fact that Black people are under the control of white section. Though Mrs. Cullinan renamed Glory, Glory accepts it. Angelou was not ready to be glad about being treated like an object, which could be given a new name whenever its owner finds it pleased. She also pitied her fellow maid, and conveyed her inner feelings by using an angry tone of writing. Changing one's own birth name shows their superiority and bossy nature towards their employees. Erasing the racist attitude from the minds of the white people was the complicated issue.

There is another incident of racial discrimination in the novel's same chapter. It is strictly prohibited to use any materials or dishes used by the white family members in the working place. The two coloured maids have separate glasses and dishes kept in separate shelves. "I had a glass to drink from, and it sat with Miss Glory's on a separate shelf from the others" (CB 115). Marguerite strikes back her boss with extreme anger by breaking several pieces of Mrs. Cullinan's heirloom china dishes. Marguerite exposes her instinct of hesitation for a new name. After scolding her with few discriminatory names, at last Mrs. Cullinan called Maya by her correct, but mispronounced the name as Margaret. Maya Angelou actively protested against the injustice done to her identity. She tried to save her individuality. Through this incident, the writer learnt that until an individual refuse to

compromise with the insults, he or she must be imprisoned in a cage. This is an actual open confrontation against racism by the author herself.

On a Saturday evening, Bailey did not turned up home. Fear started to grow like thorns in each one's heart. It is not safe for a coloured people to roam around at night in America. "Any break from routine may herald for them unbearable news. For this reason, Southern Blacks until the present generation could be counted among America's arch conservatives" (CB 123). The safety and security of a coloured citizen remained a question mark in the society of the United States.

Momma's customers came to listen to the radio show which broadcasted the World Champion Boxing Match in between Joe Louis a coloured and Carnera, a white man. Joe Louis is a coloured man whom the coloured community expected to win. Everyone felt that Joe Louis is fighting for their rights and dignity. They were so nervous about his victory. All aimed his victory as a healing medicine for their tragic incidents which was happened in their friends' life. When he was beaten too hard, they lost hope. They remembered how many suffered because of racial discrimination and violence.

My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed. It was hounds on the trail of a man running through slimy swamps. It was a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful. (CB 146)

The customers were broken and lost hope, when he was continuously blown up by the white boxer. They started to feel inferior about their own coloured race that they are hated by all and fit for nothing:

The men in the Store stood away from the walls and at attention. Women greedily clutched the babes on their lap s while on the porch the shuffling and

smiles, flirtings and pinching of a few minutes before we gone. This might be the end of the world. If Joe lost we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations that we were lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than the apes. True that we were stupid and ugly and lazy and dirty and, unlucky and worst of all, that God Himself hated us and ordained us to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, forever and ever, world without end. (CB 146)

In the eleventh hour, Joe Louis knocked him down with heavy iron like punches and made him to bleed. He won the match and the coloured people exulted as if their family member hit the trophy. They felt some unknown peace within themselves. They celebrated by eating and drinking. People who came from long distance made arrangements to stay in town, because it is not safe for a black man or his family to be caught by white folks at night. “It wouldn’t do for a Black man and his family to be caught on a lonely country road on a night when Joe Louis had proved that we were the strongest people in the world” (CB 148). The coloured scared about losing the match, because it will bring shame to the whole community and the Americans will definitely decry them. After Joe’s victory, they frightened whether the white may take revenge on them.

On Marguerite’s eighth grade graduation day Mr. Edward Donleavy a white chief guest had given his racist speech. He openly gave his statement that, the African Americans are unable to take a position of a scientist or any other noble profession. They are fit to be athletes and boxers. “The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises” (CB 192 -193). Nell Irvin Painter in his *Creating Black Americans* described about the horrific role of segregation in the Southern public life. “Libraries, parks, swimming pools and public colleges were closed off for the

blacks. Schools were in particular segregated and the funding of the schools were intentionally controlled, so the white children would benefit, due to the common belief that blacks did not need good or lengthy education” (142). It enraged the coloured Americans over there, but they could not do anything. Since they are bounded by the white racism, they could not stand against these words. Their disability created hatred among themselves that they are brought up and trained to remain submissive under the control of whites.

It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quiet and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead. I thought I should like to see us all dead, one on top of the other. . . . As a species, we were an abomination. All of us. (CB 194)

In *Creating Black Americans*, Nell Irvin Painter pointed out that “segregation in education was unconstitutional, was enforced from the 1960’s to 1970’s. However, desegregation was not welcome everywhere and caused great problems” (251). Angelou discovered that to be a coloured female means, having no control over one’s life. As psychologist E. Earl Baughman correctly pointed out that “American society has gone to great lengths to teach the black that he is inferior” (38).

Then the Valedictory speech had been given by Henry Reed boosted up the spirit of the black community. In that he sung the Negro National Anthem, “Lift ev’ry voice and sing / Till earth and heaven ring / Ring with the harmonies of Liberty. . .” a poem written by James Weldon Johnson and music composed by J. Rosamond Johnson. This song rejuvenated the community’s pride. It also made Marguerite to feel the pride of her heritage and the greatness of black poets.

Marguerite suffered from severe tooth ache due to cavities, so Momma took her to a white Dentist named Lincoln. They believed that Dentist Lincoln would treat Marguerite,

because Momma helped him during his hard times. They were completely humiliated by the dentist's policy "Annie, you know I don't treat nigra, colored people. . . . Annie, everybody has a policy. In this world you have to have a policy. Now, my policy is I don't treat colored people" (CB 202).

When Dentist Lincoln was in financial crisis, he was in a situation to lose his building but Momma lent money and helped him to restart his life. He persuaded her to move on because he repaid all her money on time, so no use of speaking about that. Once again when Momma reminded him how he struggled to come up, he insulted her that "Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (CB 203). This revealed the cruel racist mindset of dentist Lincoln. According to him the coloured Americans are inferior creatures than dogs. Momma thought that it is dangerous for a growing up child to see all these discrimination, so she asked Marguerite to wait outside the room.

Angelou used the stream of conscious technique when she waited out for her grandmother Mrs. Henderson. She also thought that, the passive resistance would not work out in this situation so Momma confronted with the white dentist:

"I didn't ask you to apologize in front of Marguerite, because I don't want her to know my power, but I order you, now and herewith. Leave Stamps by sundown." "Mrs. Henderson, I can't get my equipment ..." He was shaking terribly now. "Now, that brings me to my second order. You will never again practice dentistry. Never! When you get settled in your next place, you will be a vegetarian caring for dogs with the mange, cats with the cholera and cows with the epizootic. Is that clear?" The saliva ran down his chin and his eyes filled with tears. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you for not killing me. Thank you, Mrs. Henderson." (CB 204-205)

The above italicized incident happened in the imagination of the writer and protagonist Maya Angelou. In reality, it did not happen. Momma's confrontation was not violent like Maya's imagination. She collected the interest for money which she lent him before.

When Bailey was sent on a small work to white folks town, he came back with a great shock. He could not understand why the whites hate the coloured people. He found a dead coloured man thrown into the pond. The white man who stood over there ordered Bailey and the other coloured men to move the dead corpse into the calaboose. So these Black men along with Bailey obeyed the order of the white man and carried the carcass inside the calaboose, when they came out they tried to play a game by locking the door and blamed them for the man's death. Later they were unlocked. When they left the dead man inside, the prisoners screamed that "they didn't want no dead nigger in there with them. That he'd stink up the place. They called the white man "Boss." They said, "Boss, surely we ain't done anything bad enough for you to put another nigger in here with us, and a dead one at that" (CB 212). Through this incident it came to know that a white man can play in a coloured American's life, however he wants. Momma was worried about the terrific situation of racial discrimination going around them, so she packed these children again to their mother in San Francisco.

In the city of San Francisco, racism was a serious issue. "A story went the rounds about a San Franciscan white matron who refused to sit beside a Negro civilian on the streetcar, even after he made room for her on the seat. Her explanation was that she would not sit beside a draft dodger who was a Negro as well" (CB 228). There the children once again lived along with their mother and their step father Daddy Clidell. Vivian Baxter neglected Marguerite's desire to become a streetcar conductor. She advised her that no one would hire a coloured woman as a conductor. "They don't accept colored people on the streetcars" (CB 284). These types of jobs were only open to white race people and not for the

Black Americans. In the job application form Marguerite mentioned that she was a former driver for Mrs. Annie Henderson, a white lady in Stamps, Arkansas. When the white secretary of the San Francisco street-car company constantly irritated her efforts for this job's interview, but Maya was at first prepared not to take it personally:

The incident was a recurring dream, concocted years before by stupid whites and it eternally came back to haunt us all. The secretary and I were like Hamlet and Laertes in the final scene, where, because of harm done by one ancestor to another, we were bound to duel to the death. Also because the play must end somewhere, I went further than forgiving the clerk, I accepted her as a fellow victim of the same puppeteer. (CB 286)

Then she was hired as “the first Negro on the San Francisco streetcars” (CB 289). She received this job because of the experience she mentioned in the application, if not she would not have received the post of the streetcar conductor. As a Black American they had fewer opportunities to get a decent job. They get rejected because of their race though they are intellectual. At George Washington High School, Marguerite felt like a fish out of water. So she began to bunk classes and roam around the Golden Gate Park or wander in Emporium Department Store. When Vivian discovered her playing truant, she advised her daughter Marguerite to stay at home and said “she didn't want some white woman calling her up to tell her something about her child that she didn't know. And she didn't want to be put in the position of lying to a white woman” (CB 291). This warning put an end to Marguerite's truancy. The situation also explains that how the coloured Americans maintained their distance from the whites. They do not want to be blamed unnecessarily by them. They did not prefer to lose their self respect and dignity in front of the white people.

The narrator's youth and full freedom threatened her about the future. It pressured her like walking on a tightrope from one edge to another. Marguerite was confused whether

she is a normal lady or a lesbian because of her underdeveloped growth in her body and optimistic view about that issue. In order to clarify her doubt, she had a sexual intercourse with a boy from her neighbourhood. Three weeks later, Marguerite found herself as pregnant and this relieved her that she is not a lesbian. At the same time, Marguerite hid pregnancy from the family excluding Bailey. After receiving her diploma, she exposed her secret to the whole family. No other go, the family accepted her and the baby.

Sisters of the Yam author Bell Hooks pointed out that “Black People are indeed wounded by the forces of domination. Irrespective of our access to material privilege we are all wounded by white supremacy, racism, sexism and a capitalist economic system that doom us collectively to an underclass position” (11).

The first volume of autobiography ended with the birth of a boy baby. “The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance” (292). Out of all hurdles she successfully completed her diploma, gave birth to a baby and made herself strong enough to survive in the society as an independent mother. All these hindrances and struggles taught her to balance in the society. She took all her somber experiences to equip herself as confident black woman.

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